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ABSTRACT

This brief discusses the challenge of learning English as a second language and the social interaction patterns these children exhibit, along with limited communication abilities, that are similar to those exhibited by children identified with specific language impairments or with speech impairments. It is not uncommon for many of these children to be labeled as having challenging behaviors or communication disorders, when in fact they are following a fairly typical developmental path in acquiring a second language. This brief uses a question and answer format to address the following issues related to working with preschool-aged children who are second language learners: (1) Why is understanding the impact of language so confusing?; (2) How can I tell if it is really a behavior problem?; (3) What behaviors can I expect from young English-language learners?; (4) What can I do?; (5) Who are the children who have participated in research on this topic?; (6) Where do I find more information on the topic of second-language acquisition?; and (7) What is the scientific basis for this practice?. Examples of how specific practices might be used and a one page summary handout for practitioners and families are included. (SG)

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SERIES

WHAT WORKS BRIEFS

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Understanding the Impact of Language Differences on Classroom Behavior

This *What Works Brief* is part of a continuing series of short, easy-to-read, "how to" information packets on a variety of evidence-based practices, strategies, and intervention procedures. The Briefs are designed to help teachers support young children's social and emotional development. They include examples and vignettes that illustrate how practical strategies might be used in a variety of early childhood settings and home environments.

Janelle's Story

Janelle is a new student in Ms. Corinne's classroom. She is extremely shy, generally quiet, and seems to like to keep to herself. When asked to participate in an activity, Janelle often refuses— especially when it involves large groups of children. She vigorously shakes her head in response to anything Ms. Corinne asks her to do. Lately, she has resorted to crying and throwing temper tantrums, especially when forced to join the group. To reduce the stress on Janelle and the other children, Ms. Corinne lets Janelle out of the activity to allow her to calm down. Ms. Corinne tries to explain to Janelle what she has to do, but Janelle often looks at her teacher blankly and does not respond to Ms. Corinne's questions or follow her directions. Ms. Corinne is becoming more and more frustrated as the weeks progress!

It is not unusual for an experienced teacher to have seen these types of behaviors displayed by children. In the back of a teacher's mind, she may have labeled Janelle's behavior as challenging. However, Janelle's situation might continue to baffle a teacher because Janelle comes from a home where a language other than English is the primary language. Although Janelle may have spoken a few times in the early childhood program, her teacher might not be sure about the extent to which Janelle is fluent in English or even in her home language. Her family might report that since starting school, Janelle has spoken very little at home, even in their own language. What confuses her teacher about Janelle's behaviors is that Ms. Corinne is not really sure whether or not Janelle has behavior problems. Are Janelle's refusals to interact and communicate with others, frequent tantrums, difficulty in attending, and excessive shyness signs of behavior problems, or are these typical behaviors for young children learning English as a second language? Is Janelle behaving this way because her home language is different from the language used in the classroom?

Why Is Understanding the Impact of Language So Confusing?

For many children from homes where languages other than English are spoken, learning another language (in the United States, the English language) can be a challenge. The time it takes to learn English may vary from child to child depending on the child's age, motivation, personality, knowledge of the first language, and exposure to English. However, the developmental period for learning English is fairly consistent across young children. This developmental period includes four stages:

(1) The continued use of the home language,
(2) The silent or nonverbal period,
(3) Sound experimentation and use of telegraphic speech (e.g., the use of a few content words as an entire utterance such as when a child responds to "What do you want?" with comments such as "crackers," "book," or "airplane") in the new language, and
(4) Productive use of the new language.

At issue is the fact that some of the behaviors that children might engage in during these developmental periods, such as playing in isolation and not speaking in either language, may be misinterpreted or mislabeled as a problem when in fact children are simply beginning to acquire the new language. Second-language learners might exhibit social interaction patterns along with limited communication abilities that are similar to those exhibited by children identified with specific language impairments or with speech impairments. Thus, it is not uncommon for many of these children to be labeled as having challenging behaviors or communication disorders when in fact they are following a fairly typical developmental path in acquiring a second language.

For many children from homes where languages other than English are spoken, learning another language (in the United States, the English language) can be a challenge.

How Can I Tell If It's Really a Behavior Problem?

Assessment is the key to pinpointing a child's strengths and needs, and then designing instructional programs that facilitate the child's development. When assessing a second-language-learning child, teachers and other caregivers should look at

(1) the child's abilities in terms of cognitive, social-emotional, and physical development;
(2) the child's abilities in his or her first language; and

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(3) the child's capabilities in his or her second language.

Because cognitive, social-emotional, and physical development are involved in and affected by the process of second-language acquisition, it is important to assess these areas. Knowing the child's abilities in his or her first language is critical in gaining a complete picture of the child's abilities, as is gathering information about how a child is progressing in the development of second-language acquisition. Similar to assessing children who are monolingual, conducting authentic performance-based assessment helps teachers and other caregivers see how a child uses language during day-to-day interactions.

What Behaviors Can I Expect from Young English-Language Learners?

Some behaviors common among children beginning to acquire another language that may be misinterpreted as challenging behaviors include not talking, difficulty following directions, difficulty expressing ideas and feelings, and difficulty responding to questions consistently. For example, as children begin to acquire another language, they may go through a nonverbal period during which they begin to gather information about how to communicate with their peers and adults in the second language. During this period, children often choose not to speak, and they may isolate themselves as they take on the role of a spectator or observer. In "safe" environments (such as solitary play), some children may rehearse new words they have heard. For example, although Ms. Corinne might interpret Janelle's tendency to keep to herself as problematic, Janelle might be watching classmates and adults and attempting to figure out how to communicate.

Additionally, some children use cognitive and social strategies to acquire a new language. One strategy used by children acquiring a new language is "pretending" to understand interactions or activities, such as large group play, when in fact they do not clearly grasp what is going on. In such situations, children may have difficulty or may be inconsistent in responding to directions given by their peers or adults.

What Can I Do?

Teachers and other caregivers should understand the process by which children learn language, whether it is their home language or a new language. It is also important that early childhood educators and other professionals gather information from a variety of sources to ensure that they have a complete picture of a child's skill development. Teachers and other caregivers can learn from families not only about their children but also about the families' cultural, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds. With this understanding, caregivers will not only be able to distinguish between a challenging behavior and behaviors associated with second-language acquisition, but they also will be able to effectively support children's overall development.

Teachers and caregivers will want to individualize instruction, because even two children from the same culture might show different patterns in learning English as a second language based on factors such as experience and personality.

It is critical that early childhood settings provide a supportive and safe environment in which children can use their home language and learn a new language. Teachers can develop a systematic plan to promote meaningful participation and inclusion of second-language learners in routines and activities in the classroom. To help young second-language learners, teachers and other caregivers can build upon what the children know and engage them in situations that at the beginning may not require them to give specific responses (e.g., low-demand situations). For example, Ms. Corinne might begin trying to get Janelle more involved in large group activities by having Janelle help carry materials such as books, name cards, and musical instruments to circle time. Language strategies such as pairing new words with gestures, pictures, and cues; commenting on things a child does; expanding and extending upon children's words; and repeating what children say have been found to be effective in young children's successful acquisition of a new language.

Some behaviors common among children beginning to acquire another language that may be misinterpreted as challenging behaviors include not talking, difficulty following directions, difficulty expressing ideas and feelings, and difficulty responding to questions consistently.

Thus, collaborating with families and other professionals, creating a supportive early childhood environment, and using evidence-based language strategies are key ingredients to helping teachers and other caregivers work effectively with second-language learners. Not only will using these strategies help in distinguishing between a challenging behavior and behaviors associated with second-language acquisition, but they will enable adults to effectively support children's overall development.

Who Are the Children Who Have Participated in Research on This Topic?

Studies that describe the stages that young children go through as they acquire a second language have been conducted with a wide variety of ethnically and linguistically diverse children. These studies include children with disabilities and those who are typically developing. Children with disabilities include those diagnosed with developmental delays, communication disorders, and learning disabilities. Most of the studies have been conducted in center-based programs such as Head Start, university laboratory schools, and inclusive preschool classrooms.

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We welcome your feedback on this What Works Brief. Please go to the CSEFEL Web site (http://csefel.uiuc.edu) or call us at (217) 333-4123 to offer suggestions.

Where do I Find More Information on the Topic of Second-Language Acquisition?

(See CSEFEL's Web site at http://csefel.uiuc.edu) for additional resources.)

Practical information can be found on the following Web sites:

- Center for Applied Linguistics: http://www.CAL.org
- Early Childhood Research Institute on Culturally and Linguistically Appropriate Services: http://clas.uiuc.edu/
- National Association for Bilingual Education: http://www.NABE.org
- National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition and Language Instruction Education Programs : http://www.ncela.gwu.edu
- Office of English Language Acquisition, Language Enhancement, and Academic Achievement for Limited English Proficient Students (formerly the Office of Bilingual Education and Minority Languages Affairs, OBEMLA): http://www.ed.gov/offices/OBEMLA

What is the Scientific Basis for This Practice?

For those wishing to explore the topic further, the following resources might prove useful:

Brice, A. E. (2002). *The Hispanic child: Speech, language, culture and education.* Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

Genesee, F. Nicoladis, & Paradis, J. (1995). Language differentiation in early bilingual development. *Journal of Child Language, 22*(3), 611-631.

McLean, M. (in press). Assessing young children for whom English is a second language. In M. M. Ostrosky & E. Horn (Eds.), Young Exceptional Children Monograph Series *Assessment: Gathering meaningful information.* Longmont: CO: Sopris West.

Ortiz, A. A., & Maldonado-Colon, E. (1986). Recognizing learning disabilities in bilingual children: How to lessen inappropriate referrals of language minority students to special education. *Journal of Reading, Writing, and Learning Disabilities International, 2*(1), 43-57.

Rice, M. L., Sell, M. A., & Hadley, P. A. (1991). Social interactions of speech- and language-impaired children. *Journal of Speech and Hearing Research, 34*(6), 1299-1307.

Tabors, P. O. (1997). *One child, two languages: A guide for preschool educators of children learning English as a second language.* Newton, MA: Butterworth-Heinemann.

Wong Fillmore, L. (1991). When learning a second language means losing the first. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 6*(3), 323-346.

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Understanding the Impact of Language Differences on Classroom Behavior

HANDOUT

Points to Remember

The time it takes to learn a new language may vary from child to child depending on the child's age, motivation, knowledge of the first language, personality, and exposure to the new language.

The developmental period for learning English is fairly consistent across young children and includes: the continued use of the home language, the silent or nonverbal period, sound experimentation and use of telegraphic speech in the new language, and productive use of the new language.

Families can teach us about their children and about the families' cultural, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds.

Teachers and other caregivers will want to individualize instruction, because even two children from the same culture might show different patterns in learning English as a second language based on factors such as experience and personality.

Things to Do

Early childhood settings should be supportive and safe environments in which children can use their home language and learn a new language.

Have a plan to promote meaningful participation and the inclusion of second-language learners in classroom routines and activities.

Build upon what children know and engage them in situations that at the beginning may not require them to give specific responses (e.g., low-demand situations).

Use language strategies such as pairing new words with gestures, pictures, and cues; commenting; expanding; and extending upon children's words; and using repetition to support young children's acquisition of a new language.

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